

The Nature, Essence, and Elements of Biblical Worship

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Lecture 2

Worship is the supreme and only indispensable activity of the Christian Church. It alone will endure, like the love for God which it expresses, into heaven, when all other activities of the Church will have passed away. It must therefore, even more strictly than any of the less essential doings of the Church, come under the criticism and control of the revelation on which the Church is founded.

*W. Nicholls
in Jacob's Ladder: The Meaning of Worship*

We must also reconsider what it means to be successful. Many pastors feel discouraged if they are not preaching to large audiences and crowded auditoriums. To these pastors, success is measured not by obedience, faithfulness, and quality, but by sheer numbers and the excitement they seem to be able to produce with their programs and new innovations in worship. Let us not forget that success is simply found in doing the will of God. If we are doing the will of God, we should not be in bondage to the numbers game that holds so many pastors and churches in bondage. Not until the church is set free from the bondage of this unbiblical view of success will she be able to recapture true throne-room worship.

*Robert L. Dickie
in Throne-Room Worship*

God alone is worthy of your worship. Whatever else you worship – ambition, money, appetite, beauty, affection, friends – all of them, one by one, like the heavenly bodies, set and disappear. But God remains. Jesus Christ remains. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Give Him first place in your life. Give Him your devotion, your strength, and your love. Worship God. Worship Him exclusively. Worship Him supremely. Worship Him humbly. Worship Him consistently. But above all else – Worship Him! He alone is worthy.

*William J. McRae
The Nature of True Worship*

Religion is that which binds a man. Every man is bound somewhere, somehow, to a throne, to a government, to an authority, to something that is supreme, to something to which he offers sacrifice, and burns incense, and bends the knee.

*G. Campbell Morgan
The Westminster Pulpit*

Both for perplexity and for dulled conscience the remedy is the same; sincere and spiritual worship. For worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the

quickenning of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose – and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin. Worship in spirit and truth is the way to the solution of perplexity and to be the liberation from sin.

*William Temple
Archbishop of Canterbury*

Worship stands as the goal toward which reformation and revival look. Why do we seek to reform the understanding of the church? So that she will worship more fully and more accurately. Why do we ask God to revive His work among us? So that His activity will produce true worshipers. Worship is the goal of all the activity that created persons in the universe experience. Hell itself, with its fiery testimony to the righteous judgment of God, exists to point up the grandeur of God's moral character. If there is any activity that is not directly concerned with worship, it must lie deep in intertrinitarian relations of which we know and experience nothing.

*Tom Wells
Reformation and Revival*

Too late have I loved You, O Beauty so ancient, O Beauty so new, too late have I loved You! You were within me but I was outside myself, and I sought You there! In my weakness I ran after the beauty of the things You have made. You were with me, and I was not with You. The things You have made kept me from You – the things which would have no being unless they existed in You!

You have called, You have cried out, and You have pierced my deafness. You have radiated forth, and have shined out brightly, and you have dispelled my blindness. You have sent forth your Fragrance, and I have breathed it in, and I long for You. I have tasted You, and I hunger and thirst for You. You have touched me, and I ardently desire Your peace.

Augustine of Hippo

In the average church service the most real thing is the shadowy unreality of everything. The worshipper sits in a state of suspended meditation; a kind of dreamy numbness creeps upon him; he hears words but they do not register, he cannot relate them to anything on his own life level.

A. W. Tozer

The Fall did not signal the end of worship or continuous outpouring. Something deeper happened, far down in our being, whereby our entirety was inverted and turned to ruin. We chose to believe a lie, spoken by one with whom truth is impossible but who skillfully dresses falsehood in light. We took this reversed light and were immediately lost and undone. Our outpouring was falsified. But it continued, with one telling difference: we exchanged gods.

Harold Best

Defining worship is notoriously difficult. Every author who writes on worship has his or her personal definition of what constitutes worship. Part of the problem is that worship is not a “thing” that can be easily analyzed and reduced to terms in the same way an inanimate object can be reduced. Worship is an act that is done with all of life and as such is an ongoing activity. Furthermore, capturing the essence of worship in a definition is difficult because worship is more than a process; it involves a relationship between subordinate and superior beings.

Defining worship is like trying to define love. We all know what it is and can recognize true love from false love. We can spot the absence of love when it should be present. We can usually discern its inappropriate expressions, but trying to capture the essence of something as large and as complicated and as relational as love is unusually difficult.

Yet arriving and agreeing upon the nature and essence of biblical worship is essential for informed and acceptable worship to be acceptable in His sight. A quick review of the previous study where we examined the necessity of biblical worship revealed the following truths that provide a starting point for our discussion.

First, worship is something God initiated. We engage with Him in the process; but ultimately, worship is sourced in God and is about Him. He is the source, the object, and the subject of all true biblical worship.

Second, worship must be intentional. True worship must be rendered in Spirit and in Truth. When we come into the presence of Yahweh, we must come as rational beings intentionally and responsibly rendering thankful, voluntary, and acceptable worship that meets His standards.

Third, worship must be informed by Scripture. If we are going to render intentional and acceptable worship, then we must understand what constitutes acceptable worship and what doesn't. Since God is the source of all true worship, He alone has the right to establish the boundaries of acceptable worship, and He has given us His Word to inform us of those boundaries.

Fourth, worship must be intimate. We do not come perfunctorily before a God we worship technically but not personally. Worship is a deep-life experience which is both based on and climaxes in personal fellowship and intimacy with God.

Finally, worship must be intense. We are to engage in worship with all of our strength, through all of our life, in all of our ways, for all of our days.

Worship as God describes it is both a response and a responsibility for all created beings but especially for those who have been redeemed by the One they worship. To this end, we must strive to understand the nature and essence of this life calling – a calling to engage meaningfully, intentionally, scripturally, relationally, and eternally with our God.

I. Description of Biblical Worship - Understanding its Nature

In a study such as this, it is often helpful to begin by examining the different and distinct terms used by the Scripture writers to describe different aspects of worship. Of course, one must keep the following admonition in mind during the process.

“The biblical words for worship do not represent discrete concepts but are part of a whole mosaic of thought about the way to relate to God. They are important windows into that structure of thought, but other terms such as faith, love, and obedience ought to be considered altogether with the particular concepts under review.”¹

A. Understanding the Biblical Terminology²

1. Worship as Spiritual Inquiry: דרש

This Hebrew term is translated “seek” or “inquire” and often occurs in worship contexts. It speaks to the issue of personal desire and heartfelt intent that would lead one to ardently pursue something or someone.

This is the term used to describe Ezra’s passion to know and understand the Law of the Lord (Ezra 7:10) which resulted in him doing and obeying what he discovered, so that he could then teach the statutes and judgments of God to Israel.

Sometimes the term is actually directly referring to the idea of “worship” as in Ezra 4:2 where the renegade Jews approached Zerubbabel and argued that since they worshipped the same God as those rebuilding Jerusalem, they should be given a part in the project. However, their worship was deviant, and Zerubbabel rightly rejected their offer. Another place where this term describes the right kind of worshiper is in Ezra 6:12.

The “seeker” comes gladly and freely, not reluctantly.

Psalm 69:32 The humble have seen it and are glad; You who seek God, let your heart revive.

Psalm 27:4 One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to meditate in His temple.

¹ David Peterson, *Engaging With God*, p 56.

² Most of the material in this section can be found in complete form in Andrew E. Hill’s book, *Enter His Courts With Praise*, in a chapter entitled “Increase Your Word Power.”

Sometimes the “seeker” comes out of desperation due to distress or trouble.

Psalm 9:9-10 The LORD also will be a stronghold for the oppressed, A stronghold in times of trouble,¹⁰ And those who know Thy name will put their trust in Thee; For Thou, O LORD, hast not forsaken those who seek Thee.

Sometimes the “seeker” comes out of deep heartfelt gratitude or to give testimony for something God has done on his behalf or for those he loves.

Psalm 119:2 How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, Who seek Him with all their heart.

2. Worship as Reverent Obedience – יָרֵא' yare'

This term is one of the most important worship terms in the OT. It has to do with the concept of the “fear of the Lord” and refers to a reverential awe in view of God’s holiness and His power.

Exodus 14:31 And when Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses.

While this term did include the idea of a healthy fear and respect for God, it was not abject terror. Included in the idea of the term was loving devotion on the part of the people because this awesome God was their God.

Psalm 86:11 Teach me Thy way, O LORD; I will walk in Thy truth; Unite my heart to fear Thy name.

The term also includes an expected response on the part of those who properly feared the Lord – exclusive worship; loving, obedient service; and praise.

Deuteronomy 6:13 "You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him, and swear by His name.

Deuteronomy 10:20 "You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name.

Psalm 135:20 O house of Levi, bless the LORD; You who revere the LORD, bless the LORD.

3. Worship as Loyal Service – עָבַד `abad

This term literally means “to work” and is used to describe what the Egyptian overseer expected of the Hebrew slaves.

Exodus 5:18 "So go now and work; for you shall be given no straw, yet you must deliver the quota of bricks."

However, when used in worship contexts, this term means to render work or service to the Lord.

Exodus 3:12 And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."

The idea of obedient, submissive, and willing service is implied in the term when used in worship context or in reference to a believer serving God.

Deuteronomy 10:12 And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Jesus would explain that this allegiance and service in relationship to worship was to be reserved exclusively for God.

Matthew 6:24 "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

4. Worship as Personal Ministry – שָׂרַת sharath

This particular term is normally translated “attend” or “minister,” and it is often found in the context of a designated individual serving or attending a human ruler or a deity/idol. It is even used to describe angels serving God.

Genesis 39:4 So Joseph found favor in his sight, and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge.

Ezekiel 44:12 "Because they ministered to them before their idols and became a stumbling block of iniquity to the house of Israel, therefore I have sworn against them," declares the Lord God, "that they shall bear the punishment for their iniquity."

Psalms 103:21 Bless the LORD, all you His hosts, You who serve Him, doing His will.

In Israel's worship, this term was used most often to describe the service or ministry in worship of Yahweh that would be done by the priests.

Deuteronomy 10:8 At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi, to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to serve Him and to bless in His name until this day.

This term is often used to remind Israel of her solemn responsibility to serve God as loyal priests. In fact, priests who did not serve loyally would be disqualified and could, even at times, be executed for their failure to serve loyally (Lev 10:1-11). Furthermore, someone who blatantly rebelled against this priestly authority could also be executed (Dt. 17:2-3).

This term is also found in contexts where God sets specific perimeters around what is acceptable in worship/service to Him. For example, the priests must wear special garments when rendering service of this nature (Ex 28:25; 35:19). Their service was to be blameless and precise in every aspect in relationship to the sacred service in the tabernacle and later in the temple (Num. 1:50-54). Finally, their service was a life-long call (Num. 8:23-26).

5. Worship as Genuine Humility – שָׁחָהּ shachah

This term means to “bow down” and is the most widely used OT term for worship. It carries the idea of bowing down low, prostrating oneself in order to give homage, or rendering worship.

Genesis 18:2 And when he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth.

Isaiah 49:7 Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, and its Holy One, To the despised One, To the One abhorred by the nation, To the Servant of rulers, "Kings shall see and arise, Princes shall also bow down; Because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You.

Genesis 24:26 Then the man bowed low and worshiped the LORD.

The word clearly implies the idea of an inferior approaching and responding to a superior in appropriate ways that reflect a proper understanding of his place and role in the presence of this superior.

This is particularly important when humans come to worship God – genuine humility must be present.

Psalm 51:17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

Job 22:29 "When you are cast down, you will speak with confidence And the humble person He will save.

6. Worship as Prostration in Prayer – סָגַד sagad

This term is a rare term in the OT for a particular feature of worship – prayer. It may be closely related to an Aramaic word with a similar root which occurs exclusively in worship contexts and only in Daniel 3 in reference to the requirement to fall down prostrate before the golden idol (Dan 3:5-7, 10-12, 14-18).

The concept of falling down prostrate before a sovereign or a deity signified submission, humility, loyalty, and dependence. This Hebrew term only occurs in Isaiah 44:15, 17, 19, and 46:6. And in these contexts, it refers to how idolaters prayed to their worthless idols.

While this term is never directly used to refer to proper worship of Yahweh, the principle signified in the term is clearly present in proper worship of the true God. If those worshipping false gods and earthly sovereigns knew how to approach them in humility and dependence, how much more should Yahweh's servant's know how to approach Him properly for their needs.

7. Worship as Nearness to God

There is a group of terms used in the OT to demonstrate that God is near and approachable and invites His worshippers to enjoy intimacy with Him.

The terms are “to come, enter”; “to walk”; “to approach”; “to draw near.”

Deuteronomy 4:7 "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him?"

B. Examining the Theological Imagery³

1. Worship as Homage or Grateful Submission

Worship in the OT is an attitude of homage or adoration to God as a great King. It could be expressed outwardly by gesture or gift, but at the end of the day, the heart attitude was what ultimately counted with God.

This attitude was more than just special affection or appreciation for God; it was reverential awe resulting in grateful, glad, and willing submission to His authority.

It was primarily expressed in obedience to His mandates and carefulness in His prescribed worship. It involved care when handling and approaching the places and the implements that He had set up to represent His presence with and among His people.

2. Worship as Service

From another perspective, OT worship was not just an idea or a way of thinking. It was lived out in daily life and was designed to impact and affect the daily behavior of the worshippers.

The idea of serving God was only possible because God had delivered them from other masters and rescued them from bondage and slavery and had brought them into His service. He would be their gracious, loving Master.

As a result, He demanded obedient service and loyal allegiance in every arena of life.

The two watch-words for one who wanted to render acceptable service in worship to God were “faithfulness” and “obedience”.

3. Worship as Reverence or Respect

In light of God’s true nature and character, He demanded that His people approach reverently and respectfully rather than casually and carelessly. It was not that God was trying to remain inapproachable and distant from His people. However, drawing near to this kind of a God was a privilege not to be taken lightly or handled irreverently.

³ The material in this section was drawn directly from David Peterson’s second chapter in *Engaging with God*.

One who truly revered and feared Yahweh would not simply do so upon entering the temple or tabernacle in worship. He would demonstrate this reverence and fear in all of life; for him, worship in the tabernacle/temple would be a whole-life experience.

The primary way a worshipper would demonstrate that he feared and revered God was fundamentally different from the surrounding pagan cultures. Like them, he would exhibit proper decorum (gesture and gift) in the presence of God. However, most pagans would only demonstrate this “reverence” in the presence of the deity and would live totally compartmentalized lives when out of his presence. Not so for a true worshipper of Yahweh. He would primarily evidence his fear and reverence in worshipful living – it would be demonstrated by walking in God’s ways and keeping God’s commandments.

II. Definition Biblical Worship – Coming to Grips with its Essence⁴

A. Definition Delineated

Worship is the proper response of all moral, sentient beings to God, ascribing all honor and worth to their Creator-God precisely because He is worthy, delightfully so. This side of the Fall, *human worship* of God properly responds to the redemptive provisions that God has graciously made. While all true worship is God-centered, *Christian worship* is no less Christ-centered. Empowered by the Spirit and in line with the stipulations of the new covenant, it manifests itself in all our living, finding its impulse in the gospel, which restores our relationship with our Redeemer-God and therefore, also, with our fellow image-bearers, our co-worshippers. Such worship therefore manifests itself both in adoration and in action, both in the individual believer and in *corporate worship*, which is worship offered up in the context of the body of believers, who strive to align all the forms of their devout ascription of all worth to God with the panoply of new covenant mandates and examples that bring to fulfillment the glories of antecedent revelation and anticipate the consummation.

B. Definition Discussed

Carson concedes immediately that this definition is inordinately long and admittedly cumbersome. However, he intends for the definition to be analyzed and broken down into its component parts in order for its value to become evident.

⁴ The material in this entire section is taken exclusively from D. A. Carson’s “Worship Under the Word” in his book *Worship by the Book*. Since the material is taken directly from that chapter, no additional footnoting will be done in this section.

1. Worship is the proper response of all moral, sentient beings to God.

Worship is not restricted exclusively to human beings. Angels also worship.

Worship in this sense excludes the idea of inanimate objects rendering relational worship to the creator.

2. Worship is the proper response to God.

There are four reasons for this:

- a. Both the OT and NT repeatedly command and encourage God's chosen people to respond in glad worship.
- b. Worship is a proper response because it is grounded in the very character and attributes of God.
1 Chronicles 16:29 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name; Bring an offering, and come before Him; Worship the LORD in holy array.
- c. Because He is creator, we are creatures under His rule and reign. He is sovereign ruler of the universe and the proper response of all subjects living in His realm is to render appropriate homage and loyal allegiance.
- d. God has told us expressly that this is how He wants us to respond to Him, and, He has given in every age specific expectations that all who would worship Him must meet. It is our job to set about to discover what those expectations are and to live accordingly.

3. We worship our Creator-God precisely because He is worthy, delightfully so.

What should make worship beautiful and pleasant for us is not its novelty or its aesthetic beauty but rather its object – God.

We should walk away from worship impressed by the beauty and majesty of God rather than by having been moved primarily by some aesthetic element of the service.

4. This side of the Fall, human worship of God properly responds to the redemptive provisions God has made.

We must realize God has given the unchangeable content of worship in contexts that do change.

We must identify and incorporate those unchanging elements of worship that are true on both sides of the cross.

We must also celebrate in proper ways the significance that certain pre-cross worship requirements have been changed by the cross. This does not mean we demean or despise those elements; we understand them properly in their context.

For example, we don't despise the theology of sacred place or of sacred sacrifice as the primary vehicles in OT worship. However, we don't continue to observe those practices because we have a new temple and an accomplished sacrifice in Christ.

5. All true worship is God-centered.

We need to be careful to understand that this has always been the way God has wanted to be worshipped. The temple and the sacrifices (the forms) of OT worship were the prescribed place and way God desired His people to demonstrate their loyal worship to Him. But they were to do these things precisely because He was the center of their worship.

We now worship a Person Who is both temple and sacrifice; in a true sense, we are Christ-centered and God-centered. However, it is a mistake to somehow assume that OT worship, rightly understood and practiced as God intended it to be, was any less God-centered.

God has always demanded whole-hearted service from His people in any dispensation.

6. Christian worship is no less Christ-centered than God-centered.

The set purpose of the Father is that all should honor the Son even as they honor the Father (John 5:23). It is impossible to say you honor the Father and reject or despise the Son!

7. Christian worship is Trinitarian.

8. Christian worship embraces both adoration and action.

Without action in the world, adoration of God is empty and hypocritical and soon degenerates into irresponsibility and godless quietism.

James 1:27 This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

9. Worship must manifest itself both in the individual believer and in corporate worship, which is offered up in the context of the body of believers.

There is a sense in which all of life is worship. There is also a sense in which corporate worship includes this idea but is also distinct from it.

All things done in private worship should be able to be done in corporate worship. However, not all things in corporate worship are permissible in private worship (ordinances).

10. The church strives to align all the forms of her worship with new covenant mandates and examples.

This would include the proper use of gifts for the mutual edification of the body; proper selection of and submission to authorities and leaders in the church; proper conduct in and out of the corporate worship; proper care for those who are lacking; etc.

11. The church strives to keep her worship properly connected to antecedent revelation.

NT worship is distinct from but yet connected to the OT. We do not divorce ourselves from the OT as NT worshippers, but we do carefully consider the proper understanding and application of the former revelation in light of the New Testament.

12. The church strives to keep her worship forward focused on the coming consummation.

We are responsible to live in light of the coming Bema.

III. Distinctives of Biblical Worship – Seeing its Elements or Components⁵

A. The Question – what are the components or elements of acceptable worship?

1. The Positions

We either are going to argue that God has not really given us in the Scriptures a definitive list of elements that comprise acceptable worship, or we are going to see the Scriptures and what comprised worship then as the defining list.

The view that states the Scriptures clearly limit and regulate what comprises acceptable worship follows and adheres to what is known as the regulative principle. Those who reject this principle are primarily having to go elsewhere to determine what is acceptable.

In other words, either we are going to take the approach that we are going to only include in our worship things that Scriptures permit, or we are going to take the approach that we are going to prohibit only what Scriptures don't allow.

Both positions have their defenders as well as their critics. Both positions have been unfairly represented.

It is precisely this question that has led to what we have come to call “the worship wars.” At the heart of the worship wars is this issue: how do we determine what is acceptable in worship?

There are only two answers if you think about it logically; you are either going to let the Scriptures regulate it entirely or you are not. If you are not, then you have to go somewhere else to get your answer on that point.

Some modern evangelical leaders have actually concluded that all the Bible does is tell us Who to worship and what our heart attitude should be (genuine/truth and sincere/spirit). But as to how and what, the Scriptures do not speak to that issue, and we have freedom to worship as we please.

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated the material in this section is drawn from R. Kent Hughe's chapter in *Worship by the Book* entitled “Free Church Worship.”

Example of someone who rejects the Regulative Principle:

Worship is like a car to get us from where we are to where God wants us to be. Transportation and communication are imperative; the mode or vehicle is not imperative.
Elmer Towns.

Example of someone who holds to the Regulative Principle:

I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were in their bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honor of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course? John Calvin

2. The Principle Explained

*The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. **But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.** (Westminster Confession of Faith)*

This principle basically argues that the only things that should be mandated/required or included in acceptable corporate worship are things that the Scripture demonstrates are to be part of such worship.

Historically this principle was articulated by a group of men who were responding and rejecting the imposition of state and national churches who were mandating the precise forms and elements which would comprise a legitimate worship service. Since many of these things (such as the common prayer book or vestments for clergy) were clearly not Biblically warranted, those who fought this battle went back to the Scriptures to see what should be

included in worship; their response and conclusion is the above statement known as the regulative principle.

Basically, it states that the only things that are allowed or mandated in worship are things that have a biblical warrant (a directive from Scripture) for being there. In other words, as the Scriptures are the guide for all of life, they are the guide for corporate worship in a distinct way.

The Reformers understood that although it is true that the Scriptures do not speak directly to every circumstance of life but rather give general instruction that we must rely on in making decisions about how to live obediently in a given circumstance, they felt God had handled the matter of His worship differently. They believed that it was of such importance to Him as seen in the evidence of how he handled false worship that He had not left His people without specific instruction regarding the primary elements of worship and then expected us to use biblical thinking and sanctified common sense in determining the circumstances related to the lesser things in worship (time of service, etc.).

This view of worship divides corporate worship into three parts:

- a. The Primary Components or Elements. Every one of these must have a positive Biblical command or warrant to be included in corporate worship. Interestingly enough, there was almost uniform agreement that the Scriptures did mandate certain things.

The Westminster confession has perhaps the best known paragraph identifying what these elements are:

The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the word, in obedience unto God with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: besides religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions; which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner. (21.5)

No one disagrees that the Scriptures mandate each of these things as a necessary part of corporate worship. The point of departure is that some who reject this principle argue

that while these things certainly should be a part of worship, they are not necessarily the only acceptable components of worship. Unless something is directly prohibited by Scripture, it should not be necessarily excluded as an appropriate component of corporate worship. Those defending this principle would argue that unless there was a positive statement or legitimate example mandating the particular element, it should not be included in corporate worship.

- b. The Forms of worship – the way in which these elements are carried out.

We must be careful to understand the Reformers correctly on this score. They are not articulating that the forms are indiscriminate. They are simply recognizing the legitimate need for change and adjustment to forms provided the essential meaning and significance of the element it communicates is not altered. In other words, while there is a certain amount of flexibility in the form that the Reformers recognized, the form had to match and conform to the Biblical intent for the element.

For example, several primary elements commanded by Scripture are singing, prayer, and the reading and teaching of God's Word. The elements had to be present in corporate worship but their forms might change. For example, a different prayer might be prayed in each service by a different qualified prayer. Different songs might be sung each week. Different kinds of messages might be preached (textual, topical, etc.). The forms were going to change, but the elements were constant.

What they did not mean was that the essential element of preaching could be replaced by another form such as artistic dramatic representation of a biblical truth.

- c. The Circumstances of worship – the details necessary for a community of believers to gather together in a decent and orderly fashion.

This would include things like place, time, number of times per week, how many hymns sung, posture in the service (sit or stand) etc.

This was left to the sanctified good sense of those given charge for leading the flock of God exercised in concert with the general principles of the Word.

B. The Answer – Essential Elements for Corporate Worship

Those who follow the regulative principle in worship in essence are stating that their worship is strictly regulated by the Bible. An apt motto might be: “Read the Bible, Preach the Bible, Pray the Bible, Sing the Bible, and See the Bible.”

1. Exposition of the Word – Preaching
2. Public Reading of the Scriptures
3. Pastoral Prayer

Note: Use Biblical wording in the prayers – pray the Scripture text back to God.

4. Spiritual Singing

Sing the Psalms!

5. Sacraments/Ordinance

See the Word of God. This is how God designed sacred drama.

6. Simplicity

No elaborate rituals, no prescribed book of prayers; it is simple worship derived solely from the statements and commands of Scripture, and all who engage in such worship can rest assured that God will be pleased with their worship!

7. Vestments

Note: Vestments became a major controversy in the Reformed churches and was rejected on the grounds that there was not biblical mandate for such a requirement in the Scripture.

C. The Observations – Worship must be distinctively Christian

1. Worship must be maintained as God-centered.
2. Worship must be maintained as Christ-centered.

3. Worship must be maintained as Word-centered.
4. Worship is consecration.
5. Worship is whole-hearted.
6. Worship is reverent.

Conclusion:

The importance of these distinctives, even at the horizontal level, is immense because corporate worship is where edification most effectively takes place. If the “church gathered” effectively worships God, then the “church scattered” will better worship God in all of life.

This approach to worship has the following to commend it:

First, it is simple. Every element is derived solely from Scripture.

Second, it is biblical. Every aspect of this approach to corporate worship is positively mandated in Scripture and hence the entire worship program is Word driven rather than tradition or culture driven.

Third, it is transferable. This approach will work in any culture and in any setting.

Fourth, it is flexible. Within the lesser circumstance of how the forms and the essential elements of worship are carried out are certain freedoms that must be respected by those who differ.

Fifth, it is reverent.